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ABSTRACT

While the recent arrival of Kosovar refugees has focused attention on the situation of incomers who live, work, and go to school with Scottish residents, Scotland has always been host to refugees from all over the world. This paper, based on a two-year study, provides illustrations of how refugee parents and pupils have faced up to the necessity and challenge of continuing (or beginning) their education in a new country, and how schools have understood and responded to the families and to their children's educational needs. The paper reports on a questionnaire sent to the 32 education authorities during the summer of 1997. It concludes that although there will be specific issues facing refugee pupils that may not be covered even with the best of policies and intentions, creating a whole-school ethos that actively respects and welcomes individual pupils and their families and promotes diversity will create a sound general base from which specific issues can be identified and addressed. (BT)

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SCRE Spotlights 74
From The Scottish Council for Research in Education

Refugee Pupils in Scottish Schools

Joan Stead, Alison Closs and Rowena Arshad

While the recent arrival of Kosovar refugees has focused attention on the situation of incomers who live, work and go to school among us, Scotland has always been host to refugees from all over the world. This paper, based on a two-year study, provides illustrations of how refugee parents and pupils have faced up to the necessity and challenge of continuing (or beginning) their education in a new country, and how schools have understood and responded to the families and to their children's educational needs.

The aim of the research on which this paper is based was to identify education responses perceived as constructive, empathetic and practical by refugee pupils, their parents and teachers and to share these with schools. For this report we have included the following under the term 'refugee': asylum-seekers, those granted 'exceptional leave to remain', those granted 'indefinite leave to remain', and those granted 'convention refugee status'. It is impossible to count the number of refugees living in Scotland as all applications for asylum are processed by the Home Office in London, with no collating of information as to residency patterns across the UK. Although the numbers of refugee pupils in Scottish schools are small, this report aims both to further understanding of their specific and particular situations, and to provide insights into how schools can, and do, respond to their increasingly diverse pupil populations.

Identifying refugee pupils is problematic. Many are invisible to their peers, teachers and education authorities. This is sometimes the result of a conscious decision by pupil and/or family not to disclose their refugee status (they are under no legal obligation to do so) so as to avoid any possible stigma or discrimination. They may also wish to avoid any prying into sensitive areas of their lives, however well-meant. Some refugee families are also fearful of authorities (both here and in their home country) knowing of their status and where they are living. Although this research aims to raise awareness of the issues and concerns of refugee pupils and their families, it is important to stress that we are not advocating that refugee families should be forced to disclose their status – this must remain a matter for the family members themselves to decide.

The *Education (Scotland) Act 1980* (as amended) states local authorities are required to provide 'adequate and efficient' school education for children in their area, and parents in this country are obliged, regardless of origin, to send their children to school or to ensure that they are educated by other means. This means that all refugee children are entitled to a place within a local authority school. At present, refugees and asylum-seekers can, in the UK, live where they choose. However, the immigration and asylum legislation currently being debated (*The Immigration and Asylum Bill 1999*) will, if implemented, legislate for the compulsory dispersal of refugees throughout the UK. This may result in a substantial increase in those coming to live in Scotland – and in more refugee pupils attending more Scottish schools.

THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The study, which took place between 1997 and 1999, had three aims: to explore policies and practices in education authorities regarding refugee pupils; to highlight refugee parents' and pupils' experiences of school; and to raise issues about how school staff understand and respond to the needs of refugee pupils. The first stage was a postal survey of all Scotland's education authorities, followed up by interviews with 'named persons' with responsibility for refugee issues in five of the authorities. The next stage was interviews with refugees: fourteen interviews with twenty-three refugee parents, and eleven interviews with twelve refugee children. Finally, we interviewed thirty-four teaching staff in seven schools in five authorities. In order to protect the anonymity of all who participated in the research, we did not 'match' the interviews with authorities geographically with those of the parents. We also gave an undertaking to our refugee pupils that we would not interview staff in any school that they had attended.

The accounts and analysis of the interviews are designed to be illuminative, aiming to provoke reflection on current practices and policies and to stimulate constructive responses from government, education authorities and schools, where they find room for improvement. Given the small number of families interviewed and their diverse ethnic, socio-economic and educational/cultural backgrounds, we can make no claims to these families being in any way representative of the refugee populations of the countries from which they come, far less representative of the still

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wider population of refugees living in Scotland. This does not, however, reduce the importance of what they say for evaluating educational responses to their needs.

Local authorities

A questionnaire was sent to the 32 education authorities during the summer of 1997. Many were still restructuring as a result of recent local government reorganisation. The aims were: to establish how many authorities had specific policy statements on refugees; to ascertain which current policies authorities saw as relevant for refugee children known to be in their schools; to try to gauge numbers of refugee children known to the authorities; and to build up a database of contacts in each authority to whom education issues related to refugees could be directed.

Policies: Twenty-eight authorities replied, all but three giving a named person responsible for refugee issues. Only two had a specific education policy on refugees. A further one had no specific policy on refugees but was the only authority to 'mainstream' the refugee category into their Multicultural and Anti-Racist Education (MCARE) policy. These three authorities also had Refugee Forums which are serviced by the Scottish Refugee Council (see local authority interviews in the next section).

Eleven authorities (including the three mentioned above) cited policies related to supporting bilingual pupils and teaching English as a Second/Additional Language as particularly relevant to refugee children. Although ESL (English as a Second Language) is often the term used by policy-makers, it does not reflect the possibility that for many pupils English may be their third or fourth language. The majority of teachers and services supporting pupils whose first language is not English now prefer EAL (English as an Additional Language). In this report we use ESL/EAL.

Other relevant policies frequently mentioned related to Equality of Opportunity, Multicultural and Anti-Racist Education, Learning Support and Special Educational Needs. However, some authorities did not consider the needs of refugee children to be different from the needs of children in general, stating that their existing policies and support mechanisms would be appropriate also for refugee children.

Numbers of refugees: Eleven authorities said they had current or recent experience of enrolling refugee children in schools, although the majority of these specifically mentioned only Bosnian children. Seven were able to provide the numbers of refugee pupils currently in their schools: three had between five and ten; and four had between none and four). These numbers, however, are probably a significant underestimate as one local authority (which could only identify one refugee child enrolled in the last two years) had recently carried out a survey which indicated that there were over 100 refugee families in their area. It is therefore likely that some schools throughout Scotland unknowingly have refugee pupils. It was acknowledged by several authorities that children were sometimes identified as refugees through ESL/EAL services, often as a result of the parents and pupils establishing a relationship of trust with these staff.

Local authority interviews

'Named persons' from five authorities were interviewed. Two were part of their authority's ESL/EAL provision, two coordinated Support for Learning and the other was a MCARE Development Officer. Two of the authorities chosen had authority-wide Refugee Forums and the other three were just beginning in their work with refugee children. Forums which involve both voluntary and statutory agencies appear best placed to address the multiple and diverse needs of refugees. Multi-agency working through Forums was recognised as important in allowing participants to keep up-to-date with the latest legislation and initiatives and to explore the relevance of these for refugee communities. Forums also raised awareness in service providers and allowed for the sharing of good practice.

All authorities interviewed indicated that good practice did exist though all commented on its *ad hoc* nature. No authority interviewed provided schools with central guidance on good practice in enrolment, induction, assessment or home-school liaison.

REFUGEE PARENTS AND PUPILS

The parents

Fourteen families took part in the parent interviews. All had arrived in Scotland within the last six years. They include families who left their countries, or did not return to them, for a wide range of reasons (often multiple reasons): war, ethnic cleansing or other forms of racist violence and discrimination, religious and political persecution. Four families were from Bosnia, two being Muslim, one mixed Croatian/Muslim, and one Romany family. There were three Iranian families, in one of which the mother was Azerbajzani, and one Kurdish family from Iran. There were three families from Sudan, one from the south, two from the north. The remaining three were from Rwanda, Malaysia, and Iraq. Interpreters were used with four of the families.

Arriving, often without prior warning, in a new country is a difficult time for both parents and children:

> I didn't know anything about schools. The most important thing was just that they went back into school and get education. I was dependent on someone else to make decisions for me. Now it is different. But at that time I understand nothing, nothing, only cry, cry with the children. (Mrs A)

Without exception, and regardless of whether they themselves had received extensive education, the parents interviewed considered their children's education to be of enormous importance. However, the availability of information and the appropriate time and means of getting this was of particular concern to all those interviewed. For example:

> I think that one of the things that is negative is that we don't know the syllabus, we need to know what she is doing, we need something solid and concrete, some

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> guidelines at least to show us what the curriculum is supposed to do each year. (Mr J)

That pupils were allocated to classes according to age rather than school performance caused confusion for many parents (this was usually in direct contrast to the education systems of their home country). Mrs H's account below illustrates the misunderstandings and potential distress for child and parent. Her daughter had missed nearly a year of schooling in her home country where children, in any case, start at age seven. At her mother's insistence, the daughter was placed in P3, although according to her age she should have been in P5:

> She was the tallest, she was feeling very embarrassed, very, very embarrassed and then when we go out and people ask 'How old are you? What class are you in?' – when she says she is in P3 or P4 – 'Oh, why?' you have to explain that she was nine months without this and this, she was so fed up, she was not doing well.
>
> So I went to the school and then I said 'now, this is a problem' – this was when she was in P5 – she had persevered for two years. By then she was very tall, she was the tallest, she was feeling embarrassed even standing in the line. She's starting hating the school. So I went to the school to explain the situation. They said OK, we'll put her in P6, but it was towards the end of the year. They put her in P6 for only one month then she went to P7. In P7 there are no friends at all … all her friends were in the other class – and she was isolated there and she felt even worse. (Mrs H)

A small number of parents felt that there was some risk of school staff underestimating their children's ability because of late entry into the school system, or requiring ESL/EAL support, or racial stereotyping:

> I remember [Mr N], went with [Daughter] and told them that she was going to do medicine and they laughed at him. But then a little while later they changed … his feeling was that they thought they came out of [own country] and out of the blue she wants to do everything and it is impossible and difficult – they didn't take her seriously. But little by little they saw that she was working hard and she managed it … (Mrs N)

However, some parents recalled with great warmth the support and understanding (linguistic, cultural and personal) that some teachers had offered. This support was often recognised as being well beyond the professional remit of the individuals concerned – particularly in the early days:

> She was a very nice person. She offered any kind of help for [Son]. She say welcome to come at any time, don't worry, just come. They are people I could absolutely rely on. (Mrs A, about the Headteacher and three classteachers of her younger son)

Yet some relationships were not viewed so positively:

> Sometimes the teacher look at us as 'foreign' and look at us different, but not all of them, only some of them. The relationship with the teacher, when I go there, I feel a bit intimidated. (Mrs N)

Of all the issues raised, children's relationships with their peers at school was the one on which parents focused most intently. The ability to make friends was understood by parents to indicate that their children were 'settling in', and were more able (with peer support) to deal with problems such as bullying and racism.

Parents recognised with a mixture of emotions that school, knowingly or unknowingly, can be a means both of transmitting the majority culture to refugee and other minority ethnic children and, simultaneously, of depriving them of their original culture and language. They expressed pride that their children spoke English so well and understood life here apparently so easily in comparison with themselves. However, they felt deep regret when this brought loss of the home language and history.

On the positive side, most parents of the primary pupils were very happy with what they perceived as the warmer and less formal relationships between teacher and child and with active, experiential learning which enabled children's thinking to develop and did not focus only on memorising facts. Several parents who had themselves been teachers noted these aspects of Scottish education with approval even when they were critical of what they perceived as insufficient rigour in setting higher standards of achievement and behaviour.

The pupils

This research attempts to take on board the right of young people to have their voices heard and is framed within an understanding of young people's views as autonomously and socially constructed. Twelve young refugees were interviewed. The parents of all but one had also been interviewed and so the children's nationalities and general situation mirrors those the families outlined in the previous section.

Many refugee pupils were aware, and sometimes confused, about the differences between school 'here' and school 'there':

> Teachers there are really strict, they are – you never spoke back to them, and everyone worked hard, everyone wanted to work hard – if you were clever, people looked up to you … here the clever ones get picked on for being clever. (Daughter, 17)
>
> When I came here I understood immediately, no order here, no discipline. It is very strict in [name of country], if someone is bad the teacher slaps and father is called in. Here if you behave badly you are just sent to the headteacher for a talk. (Son, 18)

Some pupils also recognised the need for timely and appropriate information to assist them to progress successfully through the education system, especially if they could not rely on their parents having such knowledge:

> I had a career adviser … but I was half way through my courses, they were supposed to see us before that, but they cancelled it, and so my mum tried to help me choose. But she didn't understand the system, so she said 'computing'. But I said I can't do that because I didn't do it at Standard Grade, I did it as a module … (Daughter, 17)

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There was however, unanimous agreement that more English language support was needed in order to 'catch up':

> If I could have got more help [with English language] I could have catched up. (Son, 11)

When asked about racism, name-calling and/or bullying, all but one said they had experienced such incidents at school:

> This boy called A, he said to me 'why don't you go back to your own country.' And that really hurt me – really unhappy. (Son, 11)

> They tell us [name of country] people fuck off!'
> (Daughter, 13)

We asked all the pupils what, in the light of their own experience, would make it easier for other young refugees arriving at school. Their comments show a sophisticated level of reflection, insight, and understanding of their situation:

> Have lots of activities, don't just talk, keep practising reading every day – and lots of lots of Mrs S's [his first class teacher], maybe clone Mrs S ! (Son, 11)

> Try to help them really with their problems. Don't just say today 'I'll look into it tomorrow' or 'I'm sorry'. Give them real information, how it is, don't just say 'Hello, be happy here' and the next day they [other pupils] nearly kill you in the toilets. I know, I've had that. (Son, 18)

> Try to stop the racial abuse and probably try to help with interpreters and language, but not too much. (Son, 14)

> Extra classes to catch up with your school work – not just English, but everything. (Daughter, 17)

TEACHERS' VIEWS

For many of the teachers interviewed, experience and knowledge of refugee pupils was either limited or non-existent. Yet there was often, nonetheless, a wealth of empathy and understanding as to what would enable refugees to have a successful and enjoyable school experience:

> Obviously because of our proximity to the university we have lots of kids from ethnic backgrounds and from lots of other countries coming to us ... I think generally speaking all staff in school are observant and they've got their sensors out and they're sensing how kids are.
> (Guidance Teacher)

The issue of knowing, or not knowing, the refugee status of a pupil produced some conflicting opinions:

> That [information regarding status] wouldn't matter one bit because everyone is 'special' if you like – every child is an individual and the only way their background is of any significance, regardless of where they come from, is if they need extra help. (Deputy Headteacher, primary school)

> His mother told us quite clearly his background ... with the child involved in civil war, or had been there during that time – and obviously witnessed an awful lot of things ... things like loud noises were very, very disturbing to him ... if you hadn't known the background you would just have put him down as an extremely badly behaved disruptive child – which would have been very wrong.
> (Headteacher, primary school)

Although the ESL/EAL teacher who is quoted below was very positive about the attitude of teachers towards bilingual pupils in her present school, she recalled a less positive attitude in other schools. Several other ESL/EAL teachers echoed this view:

> I have honestly worked in schools where it's like a sort of condescending attitude, a sort of missionary attitude – basically they [some teachers] equate lack of English with lack of intelligence ... There are still some people who have that sort of attitude that they [bilingual children] are second-class citizens. (ESL/EAL Teacher)

A desire to provide an inclusive school environment also produced some contrasting views and experiences:

> Every year she [the ESL/EAL Teacher] takes all the photographs and puts them up just at the entrance, so people coming in see all the ethnic minority children who are in school – sometimes I wonder if that is singling them out. (Deputy Headteacher, primary school)

> You need a balance between enabling them to take a pride in their own culture and encouraging other children to take an interest on the one hand, and on the other of exploiting them as an educational resource.
> (Headteacher, primary school)

> When she first came into school ... we looked at sort of necessities as well, as far as lunches and things like that ... We also said we don't have a school uniform as such, but we have some school items – you know sweatshirts and things – and we were trying to do that without making [pupil] feel awkward ... I tried really hard to get [pupil] to come to school events, discos, clubs ...x I used to feel sometimes, when I brought her down to the office to see if there was anything we could do to help her, that I didn't want her to think I was intruding, you know into her space. But at the same time I wanted to offer her support if she needed anything, and I think she found that quite difficult.
> (Subject Teacher)

The need for both individualised attention, and support/ the opportunity to become part of the school community, also needed to be sensitively managed if the one was not to be at the expense of the other – as the following example illustrates:

> They [the parents] didn't come to the school very much at all, in fact I don't think I ever saw the parents in school. I don't know why they didn't show an interest. I mean she [pupil] used to take the report cards home and her parents were quite pleased with her progress ... I don't know if they understood that they could come ...
> (ESL/EAL Teacher)

However, later interviews with other staff at this school clarified the picture above. The family attended the school once a month for a special multi-disciplinary meeting – yet no one seemed to know if the parents chose not to attend parents evenings (seeing their monthly meetings as adequate contact with the school) or whether, through oversight, they had not been invited.

Although many schools and individual teachers were able to assist in making the experience of refugee parents and pupils a positive one, many of those interviewed raised

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the matter of appropriate support and information for teachers:

> It does put a lot of strain on the class teacher, because none of them have particular special training in that area ... it's hard work trying to settle these children in because they have obviously come from a change in culture.
> (Headteacher, primary school)

> I certainly don't know enough. I don't know enough about refugee status. I don't know enough about the processes to go through ... I don't know enough about how it all works and what we ought to have to try and help pupils settle into a new situation. And if I don't know then it's almost certain that nobody else does. (ESL/EAL Teacher)

DISCUSSION

There could be claims that research like this 'problematises' a minority grouping such as refugees. This was not our intention – rather we were attempting to give more people an understanding of the diversity of pupils in Scottish schools which would promote further inclusion. We also felt that the presence of refugee pupils in our schools and society should be valued and celebrated as suggested in a recent (1997) report from the Refugee Council, which is titled *A Credit to the Nation.*

We discussed what there might be about the experiences of refugees which might have a bearing on education and school that was significantly different from other families who came from abroad. We came to the view (as did Rutter 1994, and Jones & Rutter 1998) that, unique though these families are, there was probably a shifting constellation of relevant and pertinent issues that applied more to refugees, even if they were not exclusive to them. For example:

- the experience of trauma – physical and/or emotional – accompanying departure from the home country and arriving in the UK (this may last for some time and restrict the ability of parents, initially, to engage fully in the education of their children, as they may also be preoccupied with 'survival' issues such as housing/ finance/ work/ training).
- 'not knowing' whether they would be allowed to stay (the process of claiming asylum lasts anything from a few months to several years) and the tension of 'living in two countries simultaneously'.
- the possible disruption of education before leaving the home country and on arrival in the UK.
- the 'hidden' aspects of life and values which some families may be unable, or unwilling, to disclose to others in this country, can lead to some degree of family introversion.
- the experience of loss of material possessions and status, as well as emotional losses, which may generate a very high degree of commitment to the education of children as a means to securing their future and 'insuring' them against such experiences in the future.

It is through different combinations and the compounding impact of such issues that the experience of refugee parents differs from that of other minority ethnic parents who have recently arrived in this country. In particular, several refugee parents spoke poignantly about their initial difficulties in understanding and/or dealing effectively with aspects of their children's education because of the many other pressures on them, and they looked back on this with regret, and sometimes with guilt. The emphasis these parents placed on their children participating fully in schools was, however, often 'at a cost', as home language and culture were often relegated to second place, or disappeared altogether. These issues are complex. However if information about ways of teaching and curriculum were readily available, throughout a pupil's school career, this might go some way to preventing the isolation and exclusion felt by many refugee parents and pupils.

The pupils also placed a high value on education and were prepared to work hard to learn English and 'catch up', with many of them asking for extra tuition (though this was rarely forthcoming). Yet drawing attention to them as 'different' (whether as refugees or as pupils from foreign countries) was generally not wanted. The determination of the young people to succeed at school was evident in our conversations with them – making their experiences of racism, name-calling and bullying all the more cruel given that they had come to this country seeking safety and security.

Supporting pupils

Although the invisibility of refugee pupils was a factor some schools identified as possibly preventing them providing full and appropriate support, we suggest that schools can do a great deal which would aid refugee pupils without pupils needing to disclose their status. For example, school procedures, such as induction and initial assessment, could be improved to ensure that information was collected systematically about the cultural, religious and linguistic aspects of all pupils, as well as that needed to facilitate appropriate education and support for those whose education has been interrupted. There should also be explicit multicultural and anti-racist programmes in operation, and effective support systems to deal with harassment and bullying – including racial bullying.

Schools generally need to be aware of:

- the high value most refugee families place on education and the need to provide them with an informative and accessible school handbook that gives both a comprehensive overview of Scottish education and the specific opportunities and choices available to their own children.
- the risk of underestimating the abilities of bilingual parents and children especially if, as with refugees, they are subject to additional stress.

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- how the school's positive appreciation of all forms of diversity could help all bilingual or bicultural children, including refugees, to be proud of their individuality and to identify with both/all their languages and cultures.

Schools should also be supported by the Scottish Executive and education authorities in meeting the needs of refugee parents and pupils by:

- the production of a succinct and accessible briefing sheet to provide information on the way the Scottish education system is organised, translated into languages of minority ethnic communities and refugees. It should be publicised as available for translation as the need for other languages is recognised.
- reviewing the current level of funding and resourcing of English as an Additional Language services throughout Scotland.
- reviewing how the maintenance and development of home languages can be better resourced and supported in Scottish educational provision.
- the setting up of authority-wide multi-agency Refugee Forums or ensuring that refugee education issues are included in existing multi-agency forums.
- providing information to schools and parents on how to access interpreting and translation services and setting aside funds for their use.

Obviously, there will be specific issues facing refugee pupils that may not be covered even with the best of policies and intentions. However creating a whole-school ethos that actively respects and welcomes individual pupils and their families and promotes diversity will create a sound general base from which specific issues can be identified and addressed.

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This research was funded through the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council through the Faculty of Education Research Committee. The following research reports contain recommendations for both local authorities and schools:

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Closs, A, Stead, J *and* Arshad, R (1999) *The School Experience of Refugee Children in Scotland* (Full Report) £10+p&p – from Dr Joan Stead, ESSE, Moray House Institute of Education, The University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ. Phone 0131 651 6221. Email Joan.Stead@ed.ac.uk.

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